Ghost Post Press

Collected Literary and Visual Art

“Success may also be measured by the absence of chaos.”

- *Frank Davis, Jamaican Police Officer Deployed to Grenada*

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E-Book
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Front Cover: “Pac-Man” (2018)
Nathan Heilman served for 14 years as a Communications Marine.

Back Cover: ~~Cohen~~“The Road to Larissa” (2019)
Yvette M. Pino is the founder of the Veteran Print Project.

International Standard Book Number:

This content originally appeared in “Complacency Kills” and “Bootleg” a pair of short run zines distributed among contributors.

Editor's Note

In the digital age, the basis of our communications—visuals, audio, and texts—are less ephemeral. They stick around for ages without needing a print, as we share them with each other through networks of public servers. The press is everywhere.

The press floats through the ether. It projects on walls. It appears in our phones. Images and sounds from the past merge and morph together so seamlessly through social media and digital archives that this collection competes for your attention with video of an elephant electrocuted in 1903, and your sister's baby pictures.

When making a book, deciding where to focus and what to include gets messy. How will it appear online? What platforms will host it, and in what formats? Will it be a pdf uploaded to a digital library, messaging board or forum? Will it print on demand? Who will organize the workflow, and choose the content? Will there be a website? How long will it last? What is the purpose of a book, if not to make money? What is the call to action?

Attempting to answer these questions, I made mistakes. I missed the mark. I indulged in fantasies and false hopes. It was fun. Military Veterans looking to publish their artwork have a wide array of creative outlets beyond social media to make their ideas and creativity public:

Consequence Forum started in an MFA class at UMass Boston, and continues in memory of its founder George Kovach: consequenceforum.org

Proud to Be headlines a series of print anthologies published by Missouri Humanities: mohumanities.org/anthology-series/proud-to-be-writing-by-american-warriors-volume-1/

O-Dark-Thirty publishes work from the Veterans Writing Project: o-dark-thirty.org

The Wrath Bearing Tree offers a blog, and a podcast: wrath-bearingtree.com

The Veteran Art Movement inspires compelling connections: veteran-art-movement.net

Presses proliferate, and they disappear. Rejection is an important part of the publication process. We discover where our work fits by the audience that receives it gracefully. A press gives our art purpose within a community of readers.

Amazing work remained by the wayside, as this collection coalesced. Ghost Post Press explores the ephemeral nature of art, beauty, and life on earth. Thanks for reading.

Sincerely,
Caleb Nelson
U. S. Navy, 04-08

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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The ideas expressed are solely those of the creator of each work. This collection does not represent any collective, organization, or nonprofit. Nobody fact checked information in this document. The artists and writers credited own their contributions.

Selections from the following books appear with permission: "Tipping Point" by Fred Marchant, "Long Way Out" by Nicole Waybright, and "Yesterday's Soldier" by Tom Keating.

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Andrew Fassett

Intention

Four syllables to One.
Life to no breath.
Not that it is
deadly poison.
One drop will rarely
dispatch you.
It is never written
down as the cause of death.
Is that why it
needs to always be rebranded as dangerous?

God help us to get free!
From seeing and not seeing.
From slipping into Complacency.
An alternative reality where our being
quickly becomes our lack of being
alive.
Or failing to live.
We know it doesn't just happen on the battlefield.
It can be field, garrison
or none of the above.

May these pages keep us present,
anchors for our drifting minds.
telescopes for our wandering eyes,
comrades for our lonely souls.
May they help to keep us fully alive.

Andrew Fassett served as a Combat Engineer Officer in the Marine Corps.

AMBER ZORA

RADIO NOISE

This series of sumi ink drawings and screen prints examine communication. The prints conflate time and space and are in response to international tensions, from the Cold War to today.

Started during a 2017 residency at Virginia Center for Creative Arts in Amherst Virginia, Radio Noise shows soldiers at work, and communication systems. At the time North Korea conducted a series of nuclear and missile tests.

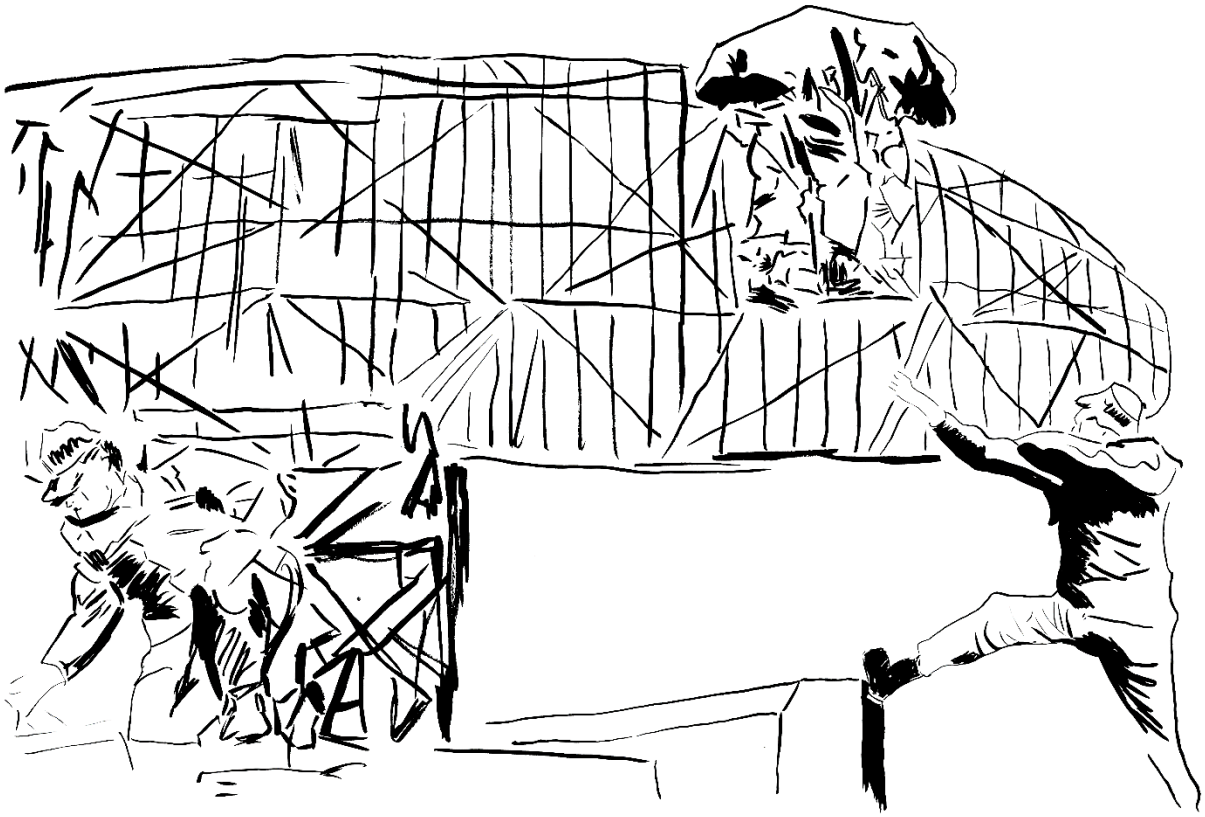
Very real bodies run these communication systems.

Communication technology transforms periods of passive reception into offensive deployment. The soldier waits to detect signs of oncoming danger, or orders to where they are called next. These modes of communication are subject to machine and human error.

These drawings are sourced from photographs. Some are images from my time in the military as an ammunition specialist. Others come from the internet, books and Nike missile site archives.

A week before I presented this series at CalPoly in 2018, an employee at the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency falsely sent out a ballistic missile alert advising residents to seek shelter. The alert concluded: "THIS IS NOT A DRILL.” Three days later in Japan, a broadcasting agency also accidentally sent an alert about a North Korean missile launch. The error was corrected in minutes. These were particularly tense events because of North Korean missile tests over Japan in 2017.

SCREENPRINT, 2017



These soldiers maintain the machine with their bodies. Radars developed by the military are meant both for protection and knowledge, defensive and offensive movement. Radars hold a complex system of knowledge when other forms of treaty and rapport have failed.

SUMI INK DRAWING, 2017

This is an image of my battle buddy, Roberts, and I on KP duty during a field training exercise. The pot on the table is one of the dishes we had to clean that evening. I couldn't resist adding to the canon of portraits of a "woman with a vessel."

AMBER ZORA EXHIBITED HER WORK IN LOCAL AND NATIONAL GALLERIES INCLUDING THE SAN FRANCISCO ARTS COMMISSION, THE LAS VEGAS CONTEMPORARY ART CENTER, AND THE VETERAN ART MUSEUM.

Craig Roberts

Complacency Kills

First night in Iraq we got rocketed
seven times in a row. We were all
Told to hit the ground
when the sirens went off
until the bombs stopped

“Complacency Kills” was spray
painted on the walls everywhere
to remind us that the one time
we relax would be the last
when we die

We were mortared and rocketed
many times while I was there
The biggest memory
was when we all gave
up and got complacent

One night the mortars rained
down. Instead of hitting the ground
or running to the bunks
we walked calmly outside
and lit up cigarettes

Looking up to see if I could tell
where the fire was coming from
that night I realized whatever
will happen
will happen

Craig Roberts deployed with the Massachusetts Army National Guard, and he graduated from the Bridgewater State University history program.

Eric Wasileski

Warrior Writers

When I say that I am a Warrior Writer
I mean that the mission of the organization speaks to my condition
It gives me hope; I love the folks, and I love the action
We are a community

When I say I am a Warrior Writer
I mean that I do not really care about
The other veterans' politics
I am glad to have buddies to pal around with

When I say I am a Warrior Writer
I mean that I appreciate the opportunity
To look inward and express things
I have hidden from myself and others

When I say I am a Warrior Writer
I have become a journeyman poet
My own book has sold over 600 copies
I host workshops and open mics

When I say that I am a Warrior Writer
I have been able to recreate myself anew
Because of the poems I am a better person
And I like myself more

When I say I am a Warrior Writer
I am not saying anything at all
I am just a guy trying to get by
The art helps

Eric Wasileski deployed to the Persian Gulf during Operation Desert Fox.

Davelle Barnes

Too Often

Too often
we soldiers
discover
we are breakable
for the first time
in Anesthesia,
we wake up
stitched together with
the fibers
of our past beliefs.

Too often
us soldiers
don't realize
the woman
in the middle of the road
has a soul
until we return home
and can no longer
find our own.

Too often
we as soldiers
don't notice
we have a story
until we have read
many others
some
that move our eyes
maybe even our lips
but never touching home.

That will always be warzone.

Too often
soldiers
have unpacking to do
have duffels that last
longer than our loved ones

stuffed with regrets
heavy and enduring.
Carrying sorrow
well beyond
our service obligation.

Too many soldiers
posses gifts
drilled out of our
feet and skulls
in the name of discipline,
valor and the science
of military psychology.

Too often
the rhetoric
outlined in
the uniformed code of military justice
punishes our humanity
in the spirit of freedom.

Too often. Too many. Too much.
What it means to be a soldier.

DAVELLE BARNES SERVED AS AN INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY SPECIALIST IN THE ARMY RESERVES.

Anthony Torres

Group Therapy

People say I'm crazy!
But they're insane to think
anyone would take a round trip
flight to Hell and not come back
burned, or more like scarred.
No – charred, as pieces of my
soul remain on that blood soaked
soil of ancient Mesopotamia.
And for what? For who?
Why there? Why now?
You don't ask those questions.
Why not? Trust me, you don't
wanna know the answer.
So we maintain our
military bearing, bear these arms
and bear this pain but don't
bare your soul when it's barely sane.
And when it's
"mission accomplished"
You take your little happy ass
back to where you came from.
And then it's not the same,
the faces are, but the vibe is
different, it's not me it's you –
you're different.
My eyes are the same
but the lens has changed.

Anthony Torres served in the U.S. Army from 2002-06 and deployed to Abu Ghraib Prison.

KEVIN BOWEN

THE OLD MASTERS

for Gloria Emerson

We were sitting on the back porch
when the news came on the radio:
Saddam's tanks racing across the desert
into Kuwait.

"That's it," she said, rising from her chair,
stretching her arms to the sky, lighting a cigarette
in that special way she had,
balancing it nervously between
her long, elegant, and often scolding fingers.

"That's it," she said. "It's over. All over."

We were children to her, our common ground was a war
that ran like a wound through us and never let us go.
We went to it in our teens and twenties as soldiers.
She was seventeen when she arrived in Saigon,
searching the spirit of a lover.
We grew accustomed to the late night calls,
the spectacle of her figure rising in outrage,
her voice ringing out over a crowd
to call a general or a politician out for their lie.

We felt good if she repeated a phrase we used,
wilted when a misplaced word sent us for years
into the Siberia of her silence.
She slept rough at friend's homes and apartments,
feeling free to give away everything in sight.
In New York when my wife and I were just leaving,
she told us to wait in the car out front.
A few minutes later she reappeared with the doorman,
her arms loaded down coats as he carried out
the large and expensive enlarger.
She told us not to worry, her friend had too much
cluttering up his life and would never miss these things.

"No one will ever interview me," She boasted.
This woman who interviewed John and Yoko in bed,
argued with them, cigarette in hand, about what
they might really do if they were serious,
like putting their bodies at risk as others did
to stop the endless war.

I loved her tale of the sergeants getting high at Bien Hoa,
writing commendations for officers who had never left their bunkers.
She would go into prisons to talk to veterans, stay up all night,
listening to stories from people like you and me and then weeks
later call with a piece of advice
How many times her voice at the end of a phone
demanding a secretary interrupt a meetings
so a friend could be called out and told the answer was to put
the baby on top of the washing machine
to stop its crying.

She was working on her book on Gaza, when our son was born.
I think she was happy, though she wouldn't show it
when we told her he would bear her name.
She promised to take him to Paris but never got to live that long.
She'd probably hate this poem, tell me to sell it for money
for the Vietnamese or Iraqis. "Pity the world, what the greedy
have done to it, she said.
On things like this, she was never wrong.

KEVIN BOWEN SERVED IN THE 1ST AIR CAVALRY DIVISION IN VIETNAM 1968-69.

Liam Madden

The Lebanese in Her Laughter

from the Martha's Vineyard Retreat

Last night, on our ride home
one of the women giving us a ride
was asking Maggie what it was like
being a woman in the military.

We started talking about Israeli women
who fly fighter planes.

She laughed too much for my comfort
at how an Israeli Woman was in jail because
she dropped "too many" bombs on civilian targets
in Lebanon.

Something about that was funny to her.
I think she forgot the Lebanese in her laughter.

Liam Madden directs most of his energy into catalyzing and creating a world of fulfilment, creative collaboration, and realized potential through language, movement and awareness.

Karen Skolfield

The Sentry Responds

cricket song
        brown as
soldiers' shirts
        we sound
dusky
        rough skinned
no moon
        canvas smell
boots on
        exhausted
they sleep
        as they fall
begrimed
        sun salted
let me tell you
        first watch
how not city
        dark on dark
not frightened
        not exactly
but wary
        how patrol
unseeing
        the quickened ears
comfort
        of rifle
from the brush
        a voice *You ladies*
can really snore
        drill sergeant
whispers as if
        equals
and I
        not even an I
ordered silent
        ordered *look away*
which I do
        as if the trees
held secrets
        the grisaille
of darkness
        he panthers
into tents
        feels for
rifles unsecured
        me their sentry
but fighting sleep

they knew
how a man
might prowl
how a woman
failing
that I was no
protection at all

KAREN SKOLFIELD SERVED SEVEN YEARS AS A 71Q PHOTOJOURNALIST IN THE U.S. ARMY.

Jon Chopan

On The Euphrates

Halfway through our tour Elliott Hildebrandt, our field medic, was killed on IED Alley. I remember a sharp popping sound. A man who smiled at me as our Humvee passed him by. Ten children, lined up and perfectly spaced out, their hands raised and waving at us.

That morning we woke to James Darbee's screams, his legs kicking at the air in a panicked rage. His cot rocked from side to side so furiously that his pillow fell to the floor. We all circled him. We'd only been asleep for an hour when the screaming started. Someone grabbed a pillow and made like they were going to hold it over Darbee's face.

"Do it," someone whispered.

None of us slept after that, and then, beneath anemic clouds that wore the sad smiles of circus clowns, we sped towards our mission with great disdain. We babysat Army engineers while they filled potholes left by IED explosions, and that day we greeted them with the kind of hatred one usually reserves for their worst enemies. When we stepped from our vehicles any hope we had of standing on our own feet had melted away. Darbee and I stood back-to-back, propping one another up, our weapons trained on the stretch of road before us. Darbee went on and on about his dream.

"It was real, I mean, I saw it like that. We were on this road and there was an explosion, and then I was dead. You guys were all standing around laughing because there was shit oozing out of me, puddles of it oozing out my asshole."

My dream was nearly identical, but I didn't tell him that.

"I could smell it, the shit," he said. "It smelled like the Euphrates."

He walked off to find a cigarette after that and I went off to find someone else to lean against.

We left an hour before sunset. Then, a few kliks from base, we gave up on the war, sat back in our seats, stuffing our mouths with haji energy drinks and cigarettes just to stay awake. I stared directly at the setting sun so that I couldn't close my eyes to sleep without seeing volcanic flashes of light.

We lurched down a road that followed the Euphrates. It looked like a fresh wound cut into virgin flesh. We'd been taking that same route for a week by then, driving out at sunrise and returning at sunset so the road could be completed on time for a news story about progress in Iraq's struggle for freedom and decreased violence in the region. We were so sunburned, sleep deprived, starved that we didn't even raise our weapons to watch our perimeters. The engine hummed a frantic song. I'd been eating No-Doz by the fistful so that my eyes were lacquered open. Darbee kept going on about how his number was up, about that dream, about how it was so real he could taste it. As I mentioned, I'd had the same dream, knew, as we approached the tiny village along the banks of the river, that one of us was going to die.

I was too exhausted to care which one of us it was.

When we reached the village we moved slowly down the road, maneuvering around craters left by recent blasts.

“Wouldn’t it have made more sense,” Bodi said, as he guided us towards home, “for them to start at our camp and work towards the FOB?”

“That’s it,” Darbee said. “It’s our own stupidity that’s going to kill us.”

I sat in the backseat while our convoy wound its way along the Euphrates and into the village. I saw the smiling man, just then, and felt a great dumb grin forming on my face. The moon hovered off in the distance, a bruised piece of fruit waiting to be thrown away. Darbee sat next to me mumbling, “Any second now, any second.”

In those days children were used as timers, spaced out so that bombers could count the seconds between each vehicle, could detonate their devices with greater accuracy. When we passed the last child there was a roaring explosion, something you might expect to hear as you watched a giant building brought to its knees. Our vehicle shuttered to a halt and Darbee let out a girlish wail, as if we’d been the ones, as if we’d been flipped over and tossed in a ditch.

We’d both known, or thought we knew, what was going to happen. But Darbee wasn’t ready to admit that it hadn’t happened to us.

“Jesus,” he said, “fuck.”

I ran my fingers over my face. “We’re fine,” I said, even though I didn’t believe it myself.

The children took off running. I leaned out the window and saw that the lead vehicle had been hit. A smell, which I knew was human flesh, spat into the air and snaked its way into my mouth. After a few seconds I opened my door and stepped out into the street, raising my weapon against imagined enemies. I looked towards the bombed Humvee. Smoke was rising from it. I couldn’t see anything else. It was possible that everyone in it was dead. But then there was sound coming from it, men calling out to one another, checking to see if everyone was alright. They sounded peaceful, dazed and sleepy.

Darbee had yet to realize that he was alive and started to panic, thinking he’d died and was now doomed to spend eternity with us. I turned to see his bloodshot eyes. I thought he’d lost his mind because when he spoke, his voice was filled with a kind of sickened anger.

“I can’t be trapped here with you fuckers,” he said.

“James,” I said.

Suddenly I cared about being alive, about convincing him of it.

“We’re okay,” I said, although I couldn’t speak for the men ahead of us.

He looked out his window. “We’re dead. We’ve died and this is some kind of sick punishment, isn’t it?”

“I’m going to help the others,” I said.

He turned to look at me. “No one can help us now.”

“You’re alive,” I said, and playfully slapped him in the face a few times.

Bodi sat very still in the driver’s seat while Styza reached back and grabbed Darbee’s rifle. It seemed like the right thing to do.

“You can have it,” Darbee said, “I won’t be needing it.”

Styza pulled the weapon from him.

“It’s okay,” I said, as I turned and ran towards the wounded men.

“You can’t save them,” I heard him call after me.

I ran, so desperate to see who’d died, that I ignored all protocol. It was freezing. I remember my breath pushing out in frozen bursts, my lungs burning. I could see a man, lying next to the lead vehicle, his body charred and giving off smoke. His flesh had turned to slush.

As I approached the passenger side, nearest the dead man, I could hear a faint sucking sound. Hilde sat there, his neck sliced in half, so that his head titled to the left and the wound looked like a gapping mouth filled with blood. The rest of the vehicle appeared to be fine, no damage to speak of, not even a dent. I stood, staring.

The others, the men in the vehicle, began to rush towards Hilde’s side. They pushed me out of the way so that they could move him, try to save his life before he died.

But he was already dead.

I sat on the ground next to the charred corpse. Styza and Bodi stood next to me as the others screamed into Hilde’s face.

“He’s gone,” I said.

“What about this guy?” Styza said.

The dead man had a welding suit strapped around him. I could see that it had contained the blast, though later we’d find out that a buckle had popped off, that that was what had killed Hilde.

“Is he dead?” Styza asked.

I began laughing uncontrollably. Everyone turned to look at me, because none of them knew what I was laughing about, none of them found this funny. But that only made me laugh harder.

Once I gained control of myself, I asked, “Where’s Darbee?”

“What’s wrong with you?” Bodi said.

Nothing. I was only relieved that it hadn’t been me, but couldn’t say that. How could I let them know that I was filled with joy now that I was certain that I was not the one?

When Darbee finally wandered over I took him off to the side and confessed.

“Remember that dream?” I asked him.

“I was sure it was real,” he said. “Have you ever had a dream like that?”

“I have,” I said. “I have.”

As we walked back to meet the others I could see that the bomber was still alive, taking pathetic little breaths that would surely be his last, because his body was a smoking hunk of stewed meat. There was a sound, like water slowly flowing down a drain. But there was no blood, or at least none that I could see. I knew I was supposed to hate him, was supposed to see him as nothing more than a crazed animal. But I felt sorry for him, thinking he might be alive enough to suffer. Not sorry because I pitied his circumstance but because I’d been convinced by my dreams that I would end up just like him.

There was a short-lived debate about searching the village to find out who else was involved, talk of roughing up civilians. Someone even suggested dropping ordinance. A few of the guys were pretty angry.

I was ready to crawl into my cot and dream, so that I might find out which one of us would be next.

After a while Bodi said, “Odds are good they’re gone anyway.”

Shortly after that, we strapped Hilde’s body to the hood of a Humvee. There was no interrogation, no retribution, not this time anyway. Instead, we sped off into the night. No one talked during the ride.

Another vehicle dragged the corpse of the bomber behind it. There was nothing left when we arrived back at camp. Our CO said that the body parts, splayed across the road, might show our enemies the cost of bombing us.

“Or make them do it more,” I whispered.

“Fitzsimmons,” the CO said, “do you have something to offer?”

“No, sir.”

I had plenty to offer but nothing I intended to say out loud.

Someone draped an American flag over Hilde’s body. A few guys carried him. The rest of us stood in silence as they moved past.

“Lucky bastard,” Styza mumbled, once they were gone. “At least he doesn’t have to go and do it again tomorrow.”

Shortly after they flew Hilde away, each of us met individually with a combat stress counselor.

“How do you feel about what happened today?” he asked me.

Pretty good, I thought, I’m alive.

“Fine,” I said.

“Fine,” he repeated. “Can you be more specific?”

It struck me that this guy sat in an air conditioned office all day waiting for moments like this. What is war really like, he wanted to know. How does it make you feel to be a warrior? He was probably going to study psychology at Harvard when he got home, write a paper about post-traumatic stress.

“It’s okay,” I said, “stuff like this happens all the time.”

He rolled his eyes, sighed.

He decided on a new course of action. “Have you been having dreams?”

I saw myself lying on the side of the road, shit spilling out of me.

“Nothing special,” I said.

“Why don’t you tell me about them anyway?”

“I’d rather not,” I said.

Everyone stood about laughing at me, holding their sides, fell to the ground. There were explosions all around them, but they kept on laughing.

“Have you ever seen the crater an IED makes?” I asked.

“I’d rather hear about your dreams,” he said, and reached across the space between us. Each night it’s different. Each night it’s the same. At sunset we rise. The sky stands empty above us. The road goes for miles. The smiling man. The waving child. Sometimes I’m the one who stands there laughing. Sometimes I’m the one who’s died.

JON CHOPAN IS AN ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR OF CREATIVE WRITING AT ECKERD COLLEGE. HE WON THE 2017 GRACE PALEY PRIZE FOR SHORT FICTION FOR HIS COLLECTION, “VETERANS CRISIS HOTLINE.”

KEVIN BEAUDRY

LOST IN THE DESERT

My second tour to Iraq felt like an echo of the first. It felt like faux work, a tease for those that had tasted the frontlines, and instead were told to ride the bench until the fourth quarter. In November of 2005 my unit with the rest of the brigade set out for another 12-15 months of winning hearts and minds. Instead, we found our home in the desert of Kuwait.

We had set out with tanks, artillery, infantry, combat engineers, and support primed for door-to-door combat, or humanitarian rebuilding, but the CIC dictated a reduction of operational force. The unit stepped down. We waited at the border. Restless, we waited. Month after month, unloading and reloading combat gear. Every day we hear whispers, whispers calling us to war.

Supporting the mission is still a mission, but waiting for a mission feels like lunacy. However, this should not have come as a surprise. Over 200 years of hurry up and wait mantra should have prepared us for this difficulty. I had waited in line for shots without vaccines on site. I waited for hours for an email before departing base. I was told to wait for higher clearance to return fire when attacked in the heart of the combat zone. Reminders to follow the ROE, checking in with higher ranks for better judgement was a red flag of the dangers ahead.

We spent weeks in the cold winter months of the previous year ramping up for combat. In Graf and Holenfels we took up positions in mock Iraqi villages that were knee deep in snow as we wore ancient MOLLE gear.

I remember the attack they staged on the chapel. Fear lived in my veins as I crouched in the snow scanning for muzzle flashes or movement in the distance. I felt like a bad mama jama with my year in combat experience as I positioned ready for op 4 to enter my view. Instead, I found myself chastised for encouraging a private to guard a door with a rifle in a room marked as holy.

“That’s not the message we want to send. Survival is not the only goal. We have ethics and standards holding us high, even in war.”

There is a saying in the military, “A busy soldier is a happy soldier.” Or maybe you prefer, “Idle hands are the devil’s playground.” We learned this lesson back in the fall of ‘04, after returning to the U.S. military base on German soil.

Within a month back from the tour, in record numbers soldiers got locked behind bars and got extra duty for various crimes. Combat veterans that held high honor to their families and their nation spent time mowing grass, scrubbing toilets, painting rocks, and completing other menial tasks for the command in reparation for sorted actions: smoking marijuana, driving drunk, shooting heroin, or insubordination. The idleness struck all. With no mission, we began to fall apart. So back to training we went before the paint dried on the memorials of our dead.

Now in the desert, with no mission, and thousands separated from their wives and kids, there sat a brigade trained and ready for combat. I heard the command begged to cross the border that lay only a few miles away, but time and time again the answer was, “No.”

In ‘04, back on German soil after deployment we settled down. After a few months the numbers on Restriction began to dwindle as the consequences for unholy actions became clear. Weekends were liberating, but we held at bay pure ecstasy for fear of retribution from insubordination. There was now no threat on German soil, no need to live out today for the threat of tomorrow’s loss.

On the Iraqi border it was a different type of waiting. Like a wolf, held back by bars and starved, we salivated. Waiting to taste meat some had only heard about, and others had dreamed about for the last 12 months between deployments. God says that he will never tempt you more than you can handle. I have held my head to a pillow and screamed for mercy.

We stopped the bus in the middle of the sand, turned off the engine and lights and sat. Slowly the sun began to fade and all we heard was the wind floating past the sides of the bus. The four chaplains pointed all in one direction towards home, toward the glow from base lights, a beacon back to insanity that would soon end with new beginnings. Six months in the desert, we were waiting for war.

KEVIN BEAUDRY SERVED ON ACTIVE DUTY IN THE U.S. ARMY 2003-07 AND IN THE RESERVES UNTIL 2014.

HIPÓLITO ARRIAGA

NATIONAL BIRD

Soaring, 20 thousand-plus feet high, up here the view is majestic, I can see forever. The world takes on a different display, people are barely the size of gnats. I can almost imagine another life for myself, however that's not my purpose, I'm a necessary force for good in this barbarous world, delivering justice to whatever shithole requires it, regardless of sovereign borders; courtesy of the good folks funding the *War of Terror;* excuse me, *War on Terror*.

My area of operations is boundless & data collection is my obsession. Wait, do you hear that? All these uncivilized heathens do is whine & beg, petitioning for protection from me. The almighty Eye in the Sky, 66 – foot wingspan with vision sharper than that of any bird of prey, 500 lb. bombs & Hellfire missiles, my fatal talons. When will they realize their words are wasted, crying is futile? Nothing is safe when I reign down fire & fury, for none are mightier than I. Bald eagles ain't got shit on me! I don't just destroy lives, I suspend them in animation, hovering over their heads for days like bills passed due. My unwarranted presence incarcerating them in their own homes day after night, fear has replaced any trace of joy. No shadow can shield them from my wrath, eventually they'll come out & that's when I'll end them…

(UAV) Unauthorized American Vengeance, part science fiction, part Orwellian death machine, one look at me & Hitler would've prematurely discharged his U – boats. I 'm characterized as a precision weapon that effectively locates & neutralizes targets systematically with limited damage to civilians; political lingo for I fuck shit up! I've witnessed coalition soldiers perish, observed enemy combatants blown to bits, & watched as civilians departed this world violently. I've learned that all die the same, the innocent as well as the guilty, not much difference from my vantage point, just scattered limbs & torsos for loved ones to collect & bury; positive identification is nearly impossible. I've obliterated funerals & ravaged weddings; war is hell. Do you ever step on ants & give it another thought? I sure don't…

Speaking of pests, I've located a nest. Thermal imaging scans confirm a group of 10 military aged males gathered with suspicious intent. They appear to be loading large substances onto pickup trucks; could be harmless or could be a terrorist cell preparing their next attack. My "pattern of life" intelligence indicates they are involved in insurgent activity; time to release my reaper's scythe; kill em all, let God sort em out. Minimal effort required, a single finger stroke of a button, thousands of miles from the battlefield & justice is delivered faster than you can say, "Fuck yeah." Targets eliminated, I'll linger in the area waiting for the first responders to arrive & greet them with the same hostile hospitality; what we in this dirty business dub a double tap strike.

At 17 million a pop, I'm the tip of the spear; eradicating radicals & extremists with no risk to our troops. We continue to spill blood overseas with wires & keyboards, sometimes being our only connection to the combat zone. Your child's video games are the perfect tools for training & recruiting of tomorrow's desensitized button mashers. Touchy issues such as morality don't confine me; I do what's necessary minus bureaucratic red tape. Regrettably, I do kill elderly, women & children on occasion; collateral damage is unavoidable. Understand, it's not my fault; I'm just a mindless drone & do as I am programmed.

HIPOLITO ARRIAGA SERVED IN THE U.S. MARINE CORPS 2003-07, DEPLOYED IN OIF.

MICHAEL ANTHONY

PX

Eww Newport's!
Are you serious?
You're sold out of Marb Red's?
How about Camel's?
Camel's too!
Winston's?
You're kidding me even Winston's!
How about Pall Mall?
No!
Okay. Okay. Now I know for a fact that Marines hate cloves.
You've got to have cloves?
Even the cloves!
Those fucking Fobbits!
Alright fine, fuck it, give me a pack of Newport's.

When first going to war,
a bad day was a twenty-four-hour shift,
no breakfast, lunch, or dinner
and three dead.
Towards the end,
a bad day was smoking a Newport,
instead of Camel or Marb Red.

MICHAEL ANTHONY WROTE TWO AWARD-WINNING MEMOIRS: "CIVILIANIZED" AND "MASS CASUALTIES."

Adam M. Graaf

GI Jane (1997)

Demi Moore works out
alone and in combat boots,
basic-issue socks, cut-off sweats,
and a white tank top rolled up
to her breasts. She shows off
her toned abs as she moans
through a set of hanging sit-ups.
The men in her platoon don’t see her
nipples rise toward the pull-up bar
she fights to raise her chin to
or tease the barracks floor
each time she lowers her chest
to complete another push-up—
legs spread, buttocks clenched,
dog tags jangling. In the shower,
her shoulders glisten. Her spine.
The slight bloom of her hips.

She turns
to face us.

Adam M. Graaf served in the Army Reserve, deploying to Kuwait and Iraq in 2003.

JOAN KELLEY

LIZA, HERSELF

Drama Screenplay Excerpt

LOGLINE: A privileged young woman leaves the constraints of her unfulfilled life to join the Army where she's a fish out of water but finds her true self and her soulmate on the battlefield.

EXTERIOR DESERT - DAY

SEVERAL HOURS LATER the convoy lumbers along the dirt road. Gears GRIND, engines HUM. Dust plumes. Now sunglasses replace NODs. Waves of heat shimmer.

INTERIOR HUMVEE - DAY

Liza drives Brad and the media. Their dirt-etched faces struggle to stay awake. Brad stares off into the distance.

Radio chatter...

SOLDIER 1 (V.O. over radio) - This is Alpha-one to Alpha-six. Copy?

RICH (V.O. over radio) - Copy Alpha-one.

SOLDIER 1 (V.O. over radio) - What's our ETA?

RICH (V.O. over radio) - Two hours.

INTERIOR HUMMER 1 - DUSK

Soldiers 1 and 2 sit in front. Matt and Rex sit in the rear. Rex suddenly stands up and sniffs the outside air. In one swift motion, Matt pulls his 9mm from his thigh holster and trains it out the window. To Rex.

MATT - What's up, buddy?

EXT. CONVOY-NIGHT

As the convoy rounds a bend with hills on either side, a low WHISTLING. Then, BOOM! White light fills the air, as an RPG explodes on Humvee 1, disabling it. All vehicles halt.

INT. LIZA'S HUMVEE-NIGHT

Radio erupts.

SOLDIER 2 (V.O. panicked over radio) - Alpha six, this is Alpha-two. We've been hit! We've got wounded!

As the light fades, enemy snipers creep into position on the hillsides of the road. Bursts of M76 rifle fire kick up the dirt. TAK-A! TAK-A! TAK!

Liza motions to stay down to Erin and Ben as she raises her M4.

RICH (V.O. over radio) - ALL UNITS RETURN FIRE! Form two protective flanks! How many casualties, Alpha-two?

SOLDIER 2 (V.O. over radio static) - Two I think.

EXT. CONVOY-NIGHT

Smoke and debris swirl as Hummers swing into protective position around the damaged truck. PAM! PAM! PAM! A76 bullets ricochet off vehicles. STATIC comes through the radio. SAW machine-gunners shoot their way out of Humvees 2 and 8. CHUMA! CHUMA! CHUME! Sparks of enemy fire light up the hills. TAT! TAT! TAT!

INTERIOR LIZA'S HUMVEE-NIGHT

Brad has already shouldered his medic bag and M16. He exits, shouting to Liza...

BRAD: I'm going to Hummer one.

A beat.

LIZA - I'm going with you.

She turns to Erin and Ben.

LIZA (CONT'D) - Stay here until the all-clear.

She grabs her M4 and smoke grenades. Brad motions to her to stay...

BRAD - You're not a medic.

LIZA - I'll cover you.

P*AM! PAM! PAM! Angry bullets rain down on their Hummer. MOMENTS LATER Brad climbs out and crawls under the Hummer. Liza follows.*

EXT. CONVOY-NIGHT

RICH (V.O. over radio) - AIRCOM, this is Alpha-six. Heavy attack. Twenty klicks north of AJ. Request IMMEDIATE air support and Medevac. Repeat: IMMEDIATE. Radio silence, then.

RICH (V.O. over radio) - DO-YOU-READ-ME, AIRCOM?

AIRCOM (V.O. over radio) - Alpha-six, closest air is one hour out. Can you hold position?

RICH (V.O. over radio) - Only one medic. Request aid soonest. Out.

An insurgent with an RPG creeps downhill toward the left flank. POP! POP! Rich takes him out. Brad and Liza disappear under the vehicles and crawl to the damaged Humvee. ZWING! ZWING! Stray bullets rip by them RICOCHETING off the Hummers. Then, WHOOSH! An enemy flare lights up the sky and exposes them.

BRAD - SHIT!

He pauses for a second.

LIZA - Keep moving!

Bullets hail down on them... PAM! PAM! PAM!... as they crawl, pausing momentarily to return fire. Suddenly, a loud THWACK! Liza stops, grabs her calf, looks in disbelief at her bloody hand.

LIZA (CONT'D) - I'm hit!

Liza's dazed. Brad turns to help her.

LIZA (CONT'D) (breathing hard) - You go! I'll cover....

Brad, fixed on her hand.

RICH (V.O. over radio) - Get those God-dammed helicopters in here NOW!

A beat.

RICH (V.O. over radio) - I don't care what the FUCK you have to divert. I have severely wounded!

He SLAMS the radio down and directs troops while continuing the counter-assault.

INT. DAMAGED HUMVEE 1-NIGHT

Brad finds SOLDIER 1 unconscious, broken leg bone protruding through his skin. He stabs soldier's thigh with morphine, tourniquets and splints his leg. SOLDIER 2 has severe head wounds and a bloody socket where his eye was. Brad injects him. Liza pulls herself into the Humvee and staunches the soldier's head wound. Brad notices her bandaged but still bleeding calf.

BRAD (still working) - Let me take care of that.

LIZA - No, not until we get these guys out.

BRAD - We'll get them out!

Brad exits the Hummer carefully pulling the soldier with the broken leg with him. Instantly, the sniper fire intensifies and THWACK! A bullet tears into Brad's chest. He chokes up blood and crumbles to the ground. Liza looks wide-eyed at the oozing red hole.

LIZA (screaming) - BRAD! Oh God!

She looks around, panicking.

LIZA (CONT'D desperately) - HELP! Someone help me!

In the din, no one responds. She looks at Brad's life seeping away, hears his ragged breath. Steely determination overtakes her panic. BRRWHT! BRRWHT! BRRWHT! She fires into the direction of heaviest enemy shooting. Swiftly she lobs grenades until she's surrounded in smoke. She grabs Brad's collar, places her palm over his wound.

LIZA - Brad, please don't die!

As hot orange bullets pierce the night, she looks around. She sees a soldier flinch and fall. She notices a sand pit a few yards off. Enemy fire starts to quell. Teeth gritted, she drags Brad with every ounce of her 125 pounds. In the pit she stuffs his wound with gauze, covers his chest with her body. She speaks into his ear.

LIZA (CONT'D) - Avery and Sloane are waiting for you... they need you Brad. Hang on.

Bullets SLAM into the dirt around them. Brad's mouth gapes but, unable to speak, he blinks. MOMENTS LATER, WHOMP, WHOMP, WHOMP. There's a distant sound of helicopters growing louder. Then, TAT-TAT-TAT! as Apaches appear over the hills. Their gunfire lights up the sky. Some enemy drop, others flee.

LIZA (CONT'D soothingly) - Help is here. Not much longer.

Brad's breath is raspy. His chest barely rises and his eyes are closed. He struggles to speak into her ear.

BRAD - Tell them...

She strokes his brow. Her eyes fill, but she holds it together.

LIZA - Take your time.

BRAD - I love. them.

EXT. CONVOY-NIGHT

The enemy fire's suppressed and two Blackhawks land. Medics leap out and run to the wounded as the rotors continue turning. WHOMP, WHOMP, WHOMP.

EXT. CONVOY LANDING ZONE-NIGHT CONTINUOUS

Jack jumps out of one helo and helps get the wounded onto stretchers. When he sees Liza's bloodied face carried out on a stretcher, his face changes. She notices him. Liza manages a weak smile as he helps lift her into a Blackhawk. She blacks out and his face darkens. MOMENTS LATER Jack watches as Liza's Medevac lifts off into the blackness. On the ground two in body bags await their turn.

INT. BLACKHAWK-NIGHT

MALE MEDIC and FEMALE MEDIC quickly hook Liza up to blood transfusion and monitors.

MALE MEDIC (working) - I don't think she's going to make it.

Female Medic assesses the leg again.

FEMALE MEDIC - She's lost a lot of blood.

Joan Kelley is a recovering attorney, retired Navy veteran, and screenwriter.

THOMAS KEATING

SHAKEDOWN

Excerpt from the memoir Yesterday's Soldier

I was stationed at Ft Benning, located outside the town of Columbus, Georgia, southwest of Atlanta in May 1969.The Fort was the home of the US Army Infantry School. I had just resigned from Infantry Officer Candidate School, and was waiting for adjudication and reassignment, most likely Vietnam. I had been in the Army eight months.

I was billeted in 1st Casual Company. a military unit for transient soldiers, or "casuals" waiting for either orders for overseas assignment (Vietnam) or a change of their status of some kind. The company barracks (old World War I buildings) was located near the airborne jump school towers, where troops shouted Geronimo! as they jumped from the practice platforms.

Each morning, around 6AM, we casuals huddled silently in the small parade area for roll call formation in the dark — two lines of men in green fatigues, baseball caps low on our heads, the darkness obscuring our faces, a cool breeze chilling the air slightly as we stood waiting for our names to be called for attendance, and for work detail assignments.

The work details we casuals did could be anything — post engineers (garbage men), unloading or loading trucks, or small construction jobs like fixing sandbags out on the firing ranges.

Even in transit, we were still in the army. Daily roll calls, formations and shakedown inspections were the usual reminders. Shakedowns were when the company officer and sergeant would surprise us with an inspection and literally shake down bunks, lockers and footlockers for contraband — drugs, weapons, whiskey, pornography and seditious material.

During my 2nd week at 1st Casual, I was caught in a shakedown when the officer and sergeant announced the surprise inspection. Everyone stood at attention next to their bunk as the officer walked down the rows of bunks, stopping randomly to inspect each soldier's space.

He stopped at my bunk, opened my locker, but it was regulation — fatigues and boots. He pulled apart my neatly made bunk, but there was nothing there. Then he dumped my foot locker and all its contents on the floor, including three paperback books.

The Lieutenant picked them up. One was "Kiss Kiss, Bang Bang," film reviews by Pauline Kael, one of the top movie critics. The second was "The Kerner Report's National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders" about the 1967 race riots. A Matt Helm spy novel was last. He read the title of the Kael book and went ballistic.

"Kiss-Kiss Bang-Bang! A skin book! This Private has pornography, Sergeant! Put him on report!" he said throwing the book down. The sergeant wrote down my name. I was standing at attention so I could not speak. Referring to the Kerner report he said, "He has a communist book here, too." He threw it on the floor. He ignored Matt Helm.

“This is an article 15 violation, VY-OO-LAY-SHUN” He shouted at me. Have this private report to my office for an Article 15 hearing at 1700 hours! Police up those books.” He left, satisfied he found a criminal.

I was in trouble. Article 15 violations could lead to jail, confinement to barracks, demotion and pay garnishment. I was fucked.

The sergeant looked at me, smiled as he bent to pick up the books, and said, “You’re on Post Engineers every fuckin day until I say different.” The other guys in the barracks just shook their head at my bad luck.

That evening at precisely 1700 hours, I reported to the Lieutenant’s office. I walked in, saluted and came to attention. Across from me, behind his desk sat the lieutenant, the sergeant, and the battalion chaplain. The contraband books were on his desk.

“Private Keating reporting, as ordered, sir!”

“Keating,” he spoke after returning my salute, “We all have looked at your books, and this Kiss Kiss book, its movie reviews. So, we can’t charge you with pornography.” He picked up the Kerner report.

“This here report on the riots is a government published document, so we can’t charge you with sedition for having it,” He drawled. “The Chaplain has advised me that I can’t charge you, so all charges are dismissed. That is all.”

“Yes, sir!” I said, picking up the books. I saluted him, turned smartly and left.

The next morning at formation, I DID get assigned to Post Engineers. The worst part of the detail was cleaning out the big grease traps outside each of the post’s kitchens. The grease was bad enough, but the smell of old chicken, beef, eggs, and whatever else was in the trap was overpowering. And it was hot, crummy work. But I didn’t really mind. It was better than going to jail for reading Pauline Kael.

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TOM KEATING SERVED IN LONG BINH IN THE REPUBLIC OF VIETNAM FROM 1969-1970 WITH THE ARMY’S 47TH MILITARY HISTORY DETACHMENT.

NICOLE WAYBRIGHT

THE LONG WAY OUT

This is an excerpt from my novel, written 10 years after I was commissioned in the Navy. It is about my experience when I checked aboard my first ship.

Start of Day 2 onboard. Time 0300, First bridge watch 0400 – 0800 (4 a.m. – 8 a.m.)

Brenda awoke to her first early morning at sea, after having settled into her rack sometime after midnight. Three a.m. had arrived so suddenly. She reached to the side of her pillow and silenced her watch alarm, hoping the beeps hadn't disturbed Julie in her rack below. The ship rocked and rolled and pitched with the seas. She could hear the metal of the ship stretching and creaking, and she remembered that before, she had only heard that sound when she was far below decks. She felt worse than she ever had, even worse than she had felt in school when she had forced herself out of bed, weighed down with the flu or a cold. She turned her pillow over and pressed her face against it. Her head felt sluggish from seasickness, and her eyes throbbed with shooting pain from exhaustion, but the coolness she felt from her pillow gave her a moment's relief.

Less than three hours of sleep before her first watch! But three hours of sleep a night was the norm aboard surface ships, and you were lucky to get that, people had told her. She forced her eyes to stay open. In one hour, at 0400, she would have to show for her first bridge watch in the regular rotation. She now grasped the type of strain and pressure that lay ahead, how it was going to feel and how it was going to affect her. There would be four more years of predawn and midnight watches, four more years of wishing like anything for rest, and four more years of disrupting her body's normal cycle – for a way of life she had learned she did not want.

She eased her head up from her pillow. She had to get dressed and get going. In her life, she had made all the wrong choices, been wrong about everything! Outside the hull, she imagined the seas churning the ship, beating against the destroyer and tossing it, heeling it to port and to starboard, pitching it forward and then aft. The shock and vibration was loud; she could feel the vibrations in her body and in the sides of her metal rack when she touched them.

She pushed her gray wool blanket aside; she could hear the engines droning, and feel them tremor as if they were operating on the deck just below her stateroom. The sound of the engines propelling the ship against the force of the seas followed a rhythmic pattern as the ship climbed each oncoming wave, pitched over the crest, and slammed flat into the trough. After the shock waves dampened, a stillness persisted for a second before the engine drone picked back up, and the stateroom walls began to shudder again, along with the entire contents of the room. The metal chairs, desks, sink, cabinets, and rack frames vibrated at different frequencies.

The destroyer was a mere dot in the ocean, and powerless against these seas. Julie told her that the storm wasn't going to let up for another day or so. She got nervous that she hadn't yet gotten out of her rack. She couldn't be late for her first watch! She would have to make herself accept this life; she had made herself accept her lifestyle in engineering school, why not this? This was only the start of her second day onboard, underway.

She realized that overnight, the air in the stateroom had turned stuffy and humid. Her skin felt clammy and her nightclothes had a slight dampness to them. Then, above the background noise, she heard the ventilation system kick on, and she began to feel a draft of cold air flowing over her rack curtain. She pitted her will against the seas and sat up slowly. She had committed herself to a role in which her peers and shipmates depended on her to take her bridge watch. It had been her alone, who had obligated herself to performing these shipboard duties. As she sat up in her rack, it came over her that she had once again landed herself in a setting where listening to her body and to her feelings was forfeited. She would have to continue to brush her feelings aside, fight them, and ignore them, to function at all.

Reproduced with permission from Nichole Waybright. "The Long Way Out." Copyright 2016. SpeakPeace.

NICOLE WAYBRIGHT SERVED FIVE YEARS AS A NAVAL OFFICER IN THE SURFACE WARFARE (SWO) NAVY, 1996-2001, AS PART OF THE EARLIEST WAVE OF WOMEN TO SERVE IN COMBAT VESSELS.

DAVE CONNOLLY

BA HIEP'S PORCH

We'd come in off operation and drop our packs and weapons on the front porch of Ba Hiep's restaurant just beside the Catholic Church in Xuan Loc. We were snuggled between the 18th ARVN Division's base camp, the 32nd Artillery compound, and the 199th Light Infantry Brigade's main base camp, and couldn't have felt safer. It had become a ritual to end up here, a ritual we didn't want to break. We hadn't lost a guy since it started.

Madame Hiep's kids would take the block of ice we had brought out of our hands and replace it with cold bottles of Ba Moui Ba, 33 beer. The Ba Hiep would begin to ladle out Pho, strong, thick soup fragrant with garlic and lemon grass and spices we couldn't have named if it meant our lives. Little peppers floated in the broth, so hot we feared them more than the Viet Cong. It wasn't home, but it wasn't the bush. And it certainly wasn't what we ate at home, not by a fucking long shot, but it sure wasn't C Ration gorilla bars or John Wayne cookies with that nasty C Rat peanut butter smeared on them for a cold supper sitting out on some ambush.

Next would come bowls of sticky, seasoned rice with mystery meat piled on it. Guiterrez would say something like, "Sarge, yo tengo un poco Viet. Que es?" I don't speak Spanish. He spoke very little English, but they still drafted him and got him killed. Sometimes the meat was pork; sometimes it was dog. Once it was something Ba Hiep called "Gon Ki." I knew that "gon" meant banana and when I asked her about "ki" she did a little pantomime of scratching under each arm. I realized we were eating the ass of a baboon, probably Rock Ape. Only one guy wouldn't eat it. The rest of us shrugged our shoulders, said "Fuck it" and bent our heads down into our bowls. Again, anything was better than cold C Rats.

We headed up north the week after, to Quan Loi for the next operation and our streak broke, three dead, three wounded. One of the Brothers shot himself through both cheeks of his ass to get out of the war. No one blamed him or turned him in. He had done his time and just couldn't hack it anymore.

The afternoon we got bac to Xuan Loc, we were back on the porch, but it was different. We were different. The "mystery meat" that night was bitter and tasted like it had been dipped in perfume. I didn't understand what Ba Hiep said the meat was in Vietnamese, and when I asked again, she said, "Trung Si (Sergeant), en Francais, Chat." Shit. We were chewing on cat. No one would eat it. Everyone seemed really mad at being served it, all pissed off at Madame Hiep, saying shit like, "Fucking Gook," about her and to her, forgetting the pleasant safety we had felt on that porch, the wonderful meals we had been served there, the chance for such easy camaraderie in a combat zone, and the strength we had all taken from it all. Even with the Infantryman's innate superstition to keep up doing ritualistic shit, I couldn't convince any of them to go back to Ba Hiep's with me.

Then on the next operation that took us into the Michelin Rubber Plantations, we hit the big time, stepping into a huge ambush to one at least. A few of us walked away with our bodies mostly intact, but there were only eleven of us alive out of all the F Troop.
We probably should have said, "Fuck it," and ate that damn cat.

David Connolly served with the 11th Armored Cavalry in Vietnam. He wrote, “Lost in America.”

Patrick Majid Doherty

91W...HATEVER

Holes from mortar shells on the dirt.
A girl in the distance looks at me.
This shell is one we sent.
There is an old man.
The old man lifts some dry branches.
There are weapons,
grenade launchers and such.
Later the ARMY sends Apache
helicopters to blow up these arms.
Later I look up to see
one of these Apaches flying
close enough we duck.

The medic in all this,
surrounded
that evening you sit
with a man, his leg
mangled by a tank
tread. Why did he
lay in its path?

I wonder if it was so he could get out of this place.
I give him sips of water between his cries.
Maybe it's not so bad here, I think.

Back stateside, you walk the beach.
To your right, a memorial to a soldier
killed in World War One, to your left
an ocean and the same water your
grandpa swam in in that picture
on your aunt's wall. You walk
to the store where your Nana
sent you to buy smokes, where
your grandpa gave you
your first sip of whiskey.

PATRICK MAJID DOHERTY SERVED WITH THE FIRST ARMORED DIVISION, DEPLOYING TO ANBAR PROVINCE IN IRAQ, 2003-2004.

ADAM OVERBAY

Admonishment to a Barn Snake

While hefting a hay bale: down one grassy side,
I saw your O.D. ribbon glide.
Your eyes met mine. You froze to stare,
with forked tongue to taste the air —
then into a old tire did slide.

Now look, in the barn you should have no fear —
you always should feel welcome here.
Dine on worms, and frogs, and bugs,
and baby rats and errant slugs.
But our house? Don’t come near.

While I bear no great malice toward you,
you’re quite the fiend, in Bridget’s view.
With a shovel, hoe, or garden rake
she’ll try her very best to make
one barn snake into two.

So, for your sake I’ll forget I saw
your cozy home inside my straw.
Sleep through Vermont’s long winter cold —
just do it here, don’t get bold —
and you’ll live to see the thaw.

Adam L. Overbay served as an airborne infantryman and DIA operator.

Alive or Dead

for Pauline Hebert

No face, no heart, your body has no skin.
No birds to watch. One
carries you away
in its beak across the hot tarmac,
now reinvent yourself, dumb as fossil stone.

Tracer rounds ricochet off the Quonset hut.
No face. The monkey drags off your shadow. No heart.
You have to decide which boys to let die.
The Med-Evac is going down. You

have not yet learned how to do after war…

Whose wounds? What triage?
What boy-soldier can wait?

You get through each day one sock at a time,
smoke six cigarettes in two minutes.

You check out the book of names. Alive or dead,

you try to save them all.

Preston H. Hood won the Poet's Seat in Greenfield, MA for his poem "Beauty is a Cardinal."

Travis Weiner

ALMOST

In the rainy-season of 2005-2006, in farmland adjacent to the Euphrates river, about 20-30 Kilometers outside of Baghdad, our normally order-abiding and scrupulous Lieutenant (LT) made an out-of-character decision. Our mission was to establish an Observation Post (OP) in the middle of some muddy farm fields. We parked the trucks, and began trudging out to the spot marked for the OP. The only cover for miles was small earthen berms adjoining canals among the farm fields.

When we arrived, we all sat back to back in the middle of the field. We looked around, looked at each other. I asked the medic for a cigarette and rain drops began pattering down, scampering towards us. Soon the rain surrounded, soaked into our fatigues, dripped through our hair, and my cigarette broke it in half.

LT said, “Fuck this – we’re getting some shelter inside a house.” We all knew that our squads could be seen for many miles all around (defeating the purpose of an OP), and LT observed that this mission was “Stupid.”

We trudged to a nearby house, falling in the now knee-high mud. With our interpreter, we spoke to the family at the door and we told them we needed to take shelter there. They had one small space heater, in a room on the ground floor with their infant child, which was suffering from some kind of ailment.

The rest of their house was cold, and damp. So were all the occupants, us included. They insisted we huddle around the space heater, and we argued with them that the baby needed it more. But they were quite insistent. So some of the men did just that.

I posted by my team leader at the entrance to the house, to be on-watch and provide security for those inside. I grew resentful of the other men, as I stood there and no one came to relieve me for some time.

As I was stewing thinking about this, across the street from the house, I saw a man, possibly two men digging by the side of the road. Their heads would appear. They would look around, and then a shovel would become just visible and they would dig some more as they went out-of-sight, off to the side of the road in the trench.

Looking at them, I thought to myself, this is too good to be true. We had been trying to catch IED implanters for some time, after having been struck by many IEDs at that point, on foot and in vehicles. The insurgents were quite good at being stealthy in implanting them. It was rare to catch one in the act.

We played a cat-and-mouse game with insurgents, and sometimes we felt like the mice. We endured the random, brief, but violent mortaring, IED blasts, and small arms fire. It was the kind of thing that drives soldiers engaged in a counterinsurgency war to slowly lose their discipline and their humanity, the kind of thing that makes them trigger-happy for revenge, for some release. It’s the kind of thing that could drive someone insane.

I quickly yelled for a fellow soldier, and told him what was happening. He looked at the same thing I saw, and excitement grew. Somehow, the men did not see me, or us, in the house – at least, not yet. They were 75 or 100 meters away, not far at all. Word spread around the platoon, and some NCO’s excitedly began ordering us to execute a plan to take them out.

LT was skeptical. He wanted to wait, to observe longer, to ensure they really were planting IEDs. The NCO's began to argue with him. One said we were wasting precious time and losing our chance to take them out. "What else could it be but an IED?"

Our sharpshooters ran up the stairs to the roof, starting on the NCO's plan. They were going to take them out, and then if there was any trouble, if more men appeared down off the road, I with the other machine gunners would come out onto the roof to provide suppressing fire.

The NCO's and the LT were engaged in heated debate, and things were tense. It seemed to us as if one NCO in particular might disobey the LT and just fire the shots himself. We were staged on the stairs leading up to the open, flat cement roof, the standard kind for the farmland village dwellings in Iraq.

LT asserted his rank and issued a direct order to stand-down, face to face with another NCO, a squad leader. One way or the other, something was going to happen very soon.

Just then, from our vantage point inside the building, as the sharpshooters were literally right about to come out on the roof, the two men emerged into full view from across the road.

They held up their shovels. They saw us. They waived. A car popped into view, up onto the road, driving out of the ditch and into view. Now we saw why they were digging. Their car had been stuck in the mud on one of the canal roads, a regular, near-daily practice in this part of Iraq during rains. They seemed totally oblivious that they were likely seconds from almost certain death.

Seeing this, no one said a word.

The NCOs, LT, and the troops (including myself) didn't speak much about it after that. But, like all the other missed shots I'd sometimes take at passing cars, I was grateful for the outcome. I thought to myself long after, that if those men had been killed, I'd pointed them out first. I started the scramble to kill them.

In Iraq, tiny victories won the day, or small miracles. Inches, fractions of an inch, seconds, fractions of a second, the pure, sick, enraging, confusing, agonizing blender of a million variables, preordained (if that's your thing) or not (more my thing). Those instants determine life and death, who loses a limb or an eye, who escapes unscathed.

That day, the variables were in full gear. Nothing but pure chance and timing allowed these men the time to show us what they were actually doing in that ditch, on that road. That, and an LT who held firm against belligerent action.

TRAVIS WEINER SERVED IN THE 502ND INFANTRY REGIMENT, 101ST AIRBORNE DIVISION, DEPLOYING TWICE TO IRAQ DURING THE IRAQ WAR.

ABRAHAM HERNANDEZ ROMERO

Machine Gun Blues

I have my share of war trophies. My collection consists of photographs, uniforms and some random military gear that the U.S. Army didn't require to be returned, all stashed away inside an old olive drab box when I returned to the United States.

In 2003, during the initial occupation of the second Gulf war in Iraq, the Coalition Forces made their way to Baghdad. Many non combatants/civilians fled to safety into other countries leaving their homes and personal belongings behind. In 2006 I joined the U.S. Army and Operation Iraqi Freedom. By this point in the conflict multitudes of American soldiers had been deployed to the combat zone more than once.

One of these men was a squad leader in my platoon. His name was Sergeant Isaac Pedraza. My first deployment in 2007 was Sergeant Pedraza's third tour of duty. He wasn't alone, many senior non-commissioned officers had multiple deployments which felt comforting in a strange way. Isaac Pedraza was fresh out of high school when he joined the Army in 2002.

He was sent to Fort Benning, the home of the U.S. Infantry where he completed his basic training and Army Initial Training less than a year later he was on the front lines. Deployed in the outskirts of Karbala, on the route heading North toward Baghdad, the unit started receiving enemy gunfire from houses along the highway into the city center.

After neutralizing the enemy with fierce and accurate firepower he and some other soldiers proceeded to conduct house to house searches and cleared some of the homes. There within the residence he found some Iraqi Army uniforms, the general consensus was that they belonged to a high ranking Iraqi officer who had undoubtedly fled with his family. The following is an excerpt from my recorded conversation with him:

Abraham Romero: Why the photos? Why take them?

Sgt. Pedraza: I decided to take the pictures because, I don't know, it's one of those things where you... you want to try and humanize and process what's going on. At the end of the day it's a house, somebody lived there. It has a story….

Abraham Romero: Where were they? The photos, where were they located?

Sgt. Pedraza: We went to the house, cleared it to make sure there was nothing valuable, nothing of interest to us. Once we made sure there was nothing useful to use in our offensive we decided to check everything out. Uhm... and those pictures caught my eye, mainly because it's a glimpse into their lives, their culture... and just being able to have a memory of that moment is a part of why I took them.

Abraham Romero: Any other items that you remember anybody else taking?

Sgt. Pedraza: There were a lot of guns and military paraphernalia. Iraqi flags, stuff with Saddam on it.

Abraham Romero: How do these pictures make you feel now?

Sgt. Pedraza: It's a memory dude. It's one of those things where you're attached to vivid memories… It was a moment in time that helped make who I am today... Me and this family never met but we, in essence, have crossed paths… They're a part of me.

His war trophy was this package of photographs. Even though we worked together in the Army for almost three years I had no idea he had these. It wasn't until I started thinking about the photographs I personally took with my own camera throughout the deployment to Iraq and began to consider them in a different context, about how impactful that experience was and how that material could affect my work as an artist.

I was a Mortar Qualified Infantryman in the United States Army. After completing my military service, honorably discharged, I pursued a degree in Fine Art. I put away those photographs, uniforms, and military gear for many years. The memories of my war experience were not so easy to shelve. It took years, including professional help, to develop the personal and mental skills that would allow me to revisit that place in my life and mind in a healthy manner. The bulk and vivid proof of that experience was residing in a Western Digital external hard drive that had long been put away and now I had the tools to approach the documented material from a different perspective.

The idea of recreating another battle scene of graphic goriness and violence more akin to a war trophy or shock value piece was not appealing to me. It seemed contrived, stifling, done to death.

I don't want my work to be considered pro-war or anti-war, it's just a documented account of my experience and my interpretation of it. The paintings and drawings I made using photos and memories from my war experience incorporate mixed media on wood panels and watercolor paper. I adhered fabric recycled from my undergraduate canvas paintings, and old service uniforms onto the wood panels.

I used a limited color palette based on the Mexican Golden-Age of cinema icons. Initially these works only involved three colors which were Paynes Grey, Titanium Buff and Naples Yellow. I expanded to include Yellow Ochre, Warm Grey and Zinc White applied with a palette knife. Palette knives allow for an expressive and broad stroke, something I feel was absolutely necessary and vital to the expression and overall presentation of the series. The palette knife was also a logical tool, in my opinion, to break forms and blur lines to give more atmospheric sensations.

Machine Gun Blues is about a real-world combat mission. The process of using the palette knife connected with my hand, using slashing, jabbing, dabbing, smearing and spackling motions, using my entire arm, enabled me to connect to these personal memories of post-traumatic stress.

Adding cold wax to the paint made the palette knife less of an esthetic tool, converting its use to more of a practical implementation towards the final product. The additives to the oil paint in the varying layers of my paintings include gunpowder and graphite powder along with the cold wax. I extracted the gunpowder from live ammunition of a variety of calibers. It is very grainy, not powdery. It adds a rough texture to the oil paint and cold wax concoction. This addition helped in the development of a distressed surface, making the finished pieces more akin to a weathered wall or billboard in an Iraqi suburb.
Living in a war zone for over a year, I depended heavily on my friends and also on my weapons. I think that going back to Iraq mentally and emotionally through the pictures, reliving some of those moments whether they be harrowing or humorous, caused a haunting nostalgia within me. In turn I channeled that emotional energy into the body of artworks that would comprise my MFA thesis exhibition at San Diego State University in 2019.

Being a painter at heart and implementing those life lessons into the rest of my art was a natural sequence for me. Although my artworks are based on photographs, they are filtered

through my memories and artistic style. I am not a photographer. I took these digital photos in a different mind-set. I was a young man in a conflict that was bigger than my understanding and I simply documented moments that were of interest to me. I had no formal knowledge of composition, in regards to the art of composing an image effectively and formal photography. I also put these photographs away for many years, stashed away in the depths of an external hard drive, mainly because of my suffering of post-traumatic stress disorder.

As a figurative and representational artist, I found myself resisting the idea of working abstractly. I fought the notion of working loosely that my professors were pushing, however when I finally succumbed to their pressure the results were well worth it.

Plate 1 - Squad Automatic. Oil paint. Gunpowder. Fabric. Wood panel. This is one of the earlier works accomplished and largest oil painting in the exhibit. It is preceded by a few other works that I chose not to include in the show after meticulous editing. This work was inspired by a photograph taken of me by another service member at a J.S.S. (joint service station) in the Iraqi suburb of Adhamiyah. We were preparing to head out of the gate on a dismounted patrol, and I was given the privilege to be the tip of the spear with my 249

squad automatic weapon, or SAW, with 250 rounds of ammunition attached to and another 500 in my backpack.
The memories of that day came flooding in and I remembered how much my life depended on that weapon. I had to know it intimately, disassembled and reassembled with a function check in a timely manner. “I am nothing without my weapon and my weapon is nothing without me” was drilled into me as an infantry soldier since basic training, it was a fundamental belief that could mean the difference between life and death.

PLATE 1

Plate 2. Adhamiyah Mugshot. Oil paint. Gunpowder. Fabric. Wood panel. This is a clown with a pathetic look to him, an expression of sorrow or nostalgia that perhaps leads the viewer to investigate the painting further. Through the use of contrast, I purposely left the area around the clown in a lighter shade of grey to draw attention but there are dark hands at the bottom corners holding the image of the clown to create some movement in the viewer’s eye. One

can now appreciate that there is somebody holding up a picture of the jester in a fashion much akin to a mugshot in a prison.
The original photograph was taken by me, and it shows someone in uniform holding a picture of a clown over their face, similar to a mugshot. The person who was holding this picture was a friend of mine who also happened to be the youngest guy in my platoon, being only 19 years old. He was witty and humorous, kind of like our own class clown so it was almost like a portrait of his personality. Innocent and naive in a lot of ways, always taking the edge off with a wily quip after a harrowing moment. I believe there’s a guy like him in every platoon.

PLATE 2

I am forever grateful for growing up poor, being the fourth of six children, as well as my voluntary integration into the armed services of this country. My state of mind was not only reinforced due to poverty, vigorous training and drilling to succeed in the face of insurmountable odds. At times to include the cost of my very life, it was forged to adapt in

the face of adversity and overcome improbable odds. This mindset fortified my personal and academic drive to become ambitious in my professional and artistic endeavors. It drove me to push myself theoretically, conceptually as well as technically.

ABRAHAM HERNANDEZ ROMERO EARNED HIS MFA IN 2017 AND HE EXPLORES EMOTIONS RELATED TO HIS PARTICIPATION IN THE WAR IN IRAQ THROUGH HIS ART.

KEVIN BASL

WAKE-UP CALL

Six days before
the fifth deployment
of Sergeant Justin Crossnew
our chaplain
came to say
no morning
accountability
formation
and remain in the barracks
till
our silver-starred squad leader
gets cut down
from the third story fire
escape
where he double-wrapped
paracord
‘round his neck,
let himself
hang
for the whole world to see.

A Poem that Shouldn’t Exist: Some Notes on “Wake-up Call”

Poetry has the power to infuriate. It actually can make something happen. I saw it for myself. I felt the sting.

"Wake-up Call," a fast-written poem I long hesitated to share, triggered an explosive argument at the Dodge Poetry Festival in 2014. I read the poem while participating in a "Poetics of War" panel discussion with fellow veteran-writers. During the Q&A, a man stood and challenged me: "Why had the soldier in the poem committed suicide?" The question blindsided me. My tentative response went something like: "one could never truly know, perhaps hazing, perhaps multiple deployments." It was a lame answer. After all, there was so much more I could have said. Why didn't I tell him about veteran-activist and musician Jacob George, who had taken his own life just weeks before the festival? Why didn't I turn the question around, ask the audience? The man proceeded to criticize me and others on the panel for using poetry to spread vitriol rather than love and hope. Another panelist, a marine veteran, took offense. He had worked in mortuary affairs and long struggled with suicidal thoughts. He told the man to sit down, that instructing us what not to write was like censorship, the sort of thing that encourages people to kill themselves. The man slowly sat--then he jumped up and burst into a rage. He blurted out that he too was a veteran, and had watched friends die in combat. He had been in Vietnam! The yelling escalated until Lovella Calica, Warrior Writers' founder and director, stepped in and calmed both men down.

Meanwhile, the audience was slipping out of the back door, off to tell the world what they had just witnessed. It was a complicated situation, and I can't say I handled it well.
The poem is, of course, meant to be provocative. I wrote it to express the shock of learning a fellow soldier has died by their own hand. While "Sergeant Justin Crossnew" is fictitious, the content is based on two very real suicides that happened close to me.

In spring 2004, I arrived at Fort Stewart, GA, my first duty station. I remember my introduction to the 3rd Infantry Division as a tragedy of sorts. Signing into my battalion, I learned we would be deploying to Iraq in early 2005 for at least a year. Just weeks later, a private whom I knew well from radar training school hung himself publicly: late at night, in the barracks stairwell, right outside my room. He didn't leave a note. Most did blame hazing, yet in the same breath would claim they didn't see it coming. After an hour-long memorial ceremony and a briefing on depression and alcoholism, my unit resumed training.

Suicides, I learned later, had been on the rise Army-wide (and especially at Fort Stewart). The Army recorded 145 in 2001. The number would continue to grow over the next decade, reaching 321 in 2012 (little progress has been made: 2018 also saw 321). At its worst, the amount has registered well over double the national civilian rate. I don't remember anyone in the ranks, at least in my units, raising even an eyebrow over this phenomenon. I don't remember the issue coming up in conversation. Perhaps it wasn't surprising that suicide and war-making go hand-in-hand?

The other incident happened three years later, after my second deployment. Just two months after returning from Iraq, I found myself back in college, the Army fading to memory. Waiting for class to begin one morning, a soldier-friend texted, "1SG K killed himself." Nothing followed. Was this a joke? My throat tightened and my heart started pounding. I closed my notebook and left for what would become a day of confusing, emotional phone calls. Why had our first sergeant, a leader of about a hundred soldiers, hanged himself in a motel closet? This time, most blamed family strife, exacerbated by multiple deployments. But a beloved leader and a well-decorated soldier, 20 years of service, soon to retire, two teenage boys--how could he have chosen such a fate?

"Wake-up Call," a poem I rarely read publicly these days*, has shown up in two unlikely places. Gulf War veteran and ceramicist Ehren Tool incorporated it into one of his unique war cups (he's made thousands), which now lives in the Smithsonian. And artist Josh

MacPhee printed the poem on a broadside print for Philadelphia's Mural Arts Program. It got tacked up in train stations, libraries and other public spaces around the city in 2014. Much appreciated in both cases--but not worth the two deaths (or, rather, the thousands) that inspired the poem. And though I hope my poem will continue shocking readers in the way those soldier-suicides shocked me, hopefully it doesn't stop there. Hopefully, the poem will provoke questions. Why are so many service members and veterans killing themselves? Where is our culture going wrong? How can we fix it?

*The last time I read it was at a Warrior Writers performance in June 2015, at Longfellow House, Cambridge, MA. "Wake-up Call" was the evening's opening poem.

KEVIN BASL SERVED IN THE ARMY AS A MOBILE RADAR OPERATOR 2003-08, TWICE DEPLOYING TO IRAQ.

CHRIS WEINDORF

BLINK

Blink and you’re back
in the turret of an MRAP
on the side of a road off
Route Aeros pulling security
at a TCP. Left hand angling
the .50 skyward, thumb on
butterfly trigger held safe
by brass, right hand resting
on the round black turret control,
you slowly traverse your sector---
back and forth, over and over.
Listening to idle chatter over the net,
because everyone else is asleep,
because we have been out here
for 14 fucking hours baking
in the sun, as your mind
wanders over the BOLO
list, and who named a fork
a fork, and why is it spelled
F-O-R-K not F-Y-R-C
or filament or phalanges,
you sound it out in your head
as it becomes increasingly
alien and ridiculous.
Piss into a water bottle,
wishing you’d brought a wide
mouth Gatorade instead. Crack
open another RipIt as your brain
slowly liquefies and seeps out down
your right earlobe.

Blink back the rage as you rep
another set to failure, body so full
of steroids and Superpump your sweat
doesn’t evaporate. First Sergeant
comes in yelling to shut the fuck up,
we’re giving him a headache, and clean
up the goddamn gym while we are at it.
300 club? I fucking rep that shit bro.
Trying to finish your set before the smell
of your buddy’s balls in your face as he spots
you makes you pass out, haven’t done laundry
in weeks, so dirty it’s just funny now.
Getting prison big doing pull-ups and dips
on bars made of hockey sticks and 550 cord.

Blink, and you’ll miss it- the sharp
white heat flashes on the dark FLIR
as the RPGs rip into the sandbag
bunker on the roof and McGee leans
into the SAW and lays the scunion,
three to six second bursts cutting
through the night like music: Die
Terrorist Die, Die Terrorist Die,
getting confirmed kills

while Staff Sergeant Ives
crawls out of the pile
of sandbags looking like ghosts,
not a scratch on him.
“Buy a lotto ticket, sarge.”
Laughter.

Blink away the smoke
and sweat and boredom
as you cross off another day
sitting on wooden benches
and plastic lawn chairs,
smoking haji cigarettes
imported from France
twenty fucking years ago.
burning your throat
with every bone dry
Inhalation, drinking Wild
Tigers and waiting on the word.
Air is green. Air is red. Air is black.
Every possible permutation, I count
down the patrols and guard shifts
till we right seat ride and get
the fuck out of this bitch.

Blink in the darkness
as you wake up in a cold
sweat and reach for your weapon,
panic ripping through your chest
when it isn’t there, only to slowly
realize as your eyes acclimate
to the shadows that you aren’t in Iraq
anymore. You’ve been home for months.
Sit on the edge of your bed and stare
as the blurry red neon numbers
shrink and sharpen into focus
and your racing heart slows
to something resembling normal.
Three a.m. in the barracks. Shuffle
past beer cans and climb into the shower,
lay there naked with the cold porcelain
against your skin as the steaming
water pounds your chest, and you stare
disjointedly at discolorations in the grout.

Blink back the tears, alone,
as you grab another shot of Jameson,
Jack-fucking anything to catch a buzz
and drown out all the noise, and stress,
and bullshit. Watching war movies
in your apartment, the intermittent
brightness on the screen cutting
through the darkness and bouncing
off bare walls. Thinking about friends
who have been dead for years.

Thinking about that wrong turn
gunning the lead vehicle
when the driver took a sharp left
instead of going straight.
Thought nothing of it until
a half an hour later when the next convoy
didn't take a left and hit the IED.
It should have been you.
But here you are.
Take another shot.

Blink and you're back
in the civilian world,
not homeless or begging
to reenlist, despite the Army's
Prognostications. But you aren't
all back. You won't ever be
the same. You sit on a bench
watching sailboats sway
against the tide in Boston Harbor,
smiling as time turns stress,
and sleep deprivation
and ineptitudes of leadership
into peals of laughter that flash
across the waves.

Blink, and you miss it.
You miss it so much.

CHRISTOPHER WEINDORF SERVED IN THE 82ND AIRBORNE DIVISION, DEPLOYING IN 2008.

NICKIE RENEE CASTRO

I AM TRYING

As hard as it may seem or it may be
I am trying

Trying to love beyond what I can see

If I focus a bit more clearly, I might
Might
Be able to love me

Just as I am
When I feel, when I do, when I be
Whether I am a we or it’s just me

I am trying
To
Love me

I am trying
To love the way my voice shakes
when I get nervous

I am trying
To love the chaos within me while anxiety consumes me over
and I can’t breathe

I am trying
To love scars deep
beneath my skin

Though they are from my past, they still rage
like echoing in a canyon
Ever so grand

I am trying
To
Be

The version of me I can love with extended ease
The one who laughs at the right moments
And not when it seems out of place

The one who carries on a conversation
without mentioning anything
that sounds like a “poor me”

I am trying
To be okay
with not being okay.

I am trying
To love me
when I am not okay.

Even when it makes others feel
uncomfortable to hear
that I am not okay.

Even if they clearly want to

walk away
and leave me standing alone...

Not being okay.
I am trying to... love me.
Especially when it is... just me.

Nickie Renee Castro is a U. S. Air Force Veteran, and multi-faceted artist.

Marc Levy

They Are Shouting

They have open faces, open eyes,
Foreheads unlined by love
Or sorrow--sweet faces seize
The air like colts, thriving

On springy legs, jumpy manes
Their exquisite selves
Committing crimes
Walking to them.
They are shouting
Enough! Basta, enough!
Shouting: this is not America.

MARC LEVY SERVED AS AN INFANTRY MEDIC WITH DELTA 1/7 FIRST CAVALRY IN VIETNAM, 1969-70.

AUDRA WHITE

COFFEE DATE WITH JESUS

Every day is Monday on deployment. As a fobbit, my Mondays were about as catastrophic as a Dilbert cartoon, or maybe an episode of Cathy on a bad hair day. It was just me and Sargent Sugar in the office with nothing to talk about besides the grayscale heat signatures feeding from our surveillance equipment. It must have been a quiet night.

Sargent Sugar looked up from the moving shapes on her screen at me, face blanched in the colorless lights, “White, why don’t you like Jesus?”

“It’s not that I don’t like Jesus,” I said and let my voice trail off. I pretended to be examining a peculiar shape on the screen.

Immediately after confirmation, as soon as I had a choice, my first adult act in the Catholic Church was to leave it. I appreciate the teachings of Jesus Christ, and I like The Church as an institution caring for the poor, the sick, the widowed and orphaned, but I cannot overlook their complicity in atrocities.

Many church members encouraged the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and my existence is a direct consequence of the forced African Diaspora, which followed the genocide of native peoples in the Americas. Maybe my frustration had to do with Papal power protecting pedophiles, or maybe it’s about women being barred from the priesthood. The stories seemed arcane, and priests latched onto minutia like do women really have an extra rib or is that just embellishment. Would a womb get in the way of ministering to a faith community?

There’s plenty of harm to go around. There’s plenty of blame to assign, excuses to trade. I’m not down with the pursuit of gold and glory in the name of God.

I do not understand how if we hate the sin, we can love the sinner. I’m not into fire, brimstone, and the “I pray to you, you give to me” transactional framework of the divine. We are unable to speak on the will or desire of another being with any certainty: not a cat, not a lover, and certainly not a god. That’s just the problem with other minds. You can’t know them.

There is no love lost between me and the white man every adult told my child-self was the savior of all of mankind, but only if we accepted this truth. I could not believe that someone, especially God Made Flesh, could love all of humanity, die for every person who ever was and ever will be, only to accept us after death if we said the right words and felt the right way. That does not seem just, or loving, or kind, or divine, not to me, not to any version of me that I ever remember being.

All of those thoughts arose and crashed on the sore of my deep breathing, loudly sighing, mind. I said none of this to her. Instead, I gave her a parable. “It’s not that I don’t love Jesus,” I said. “I don’t want to hang out with his friends. It’s like High School, and Jesus is the popular kid. Every weekend there’s a party at Jesus’ dad’s house because his dad is not home and his mother is retired. And every weekend Jesus has his friends over to his house to party, but they’re all assholes and I just don’t want to hang out with assholes. But if Jesus wants to get some coffee and chat one-on-one, we can do that.”

“Okay White, I can appreciate that,” Sugar said.

AUDRA JAMAI WHITE SERVED AS A WATER PURIFICATION SPECIALIST IN THE U.S. ARMY FOR EIGHT YEARS.

Courtney Wilson

Dog Love

I was King Midas, but instead of gold, everything I touched turned to shit. Home after a year-long combat tour in Afghanistan, it felt like a vise grip closed around my throat whenever I was around people. But a bottle of wine would relax me enough to breathe. This is how I first met the 8-pound, ruby-red King Cavalier Spaniel with a fatal attachment disorder. Though our time together was short, that dog set me on a path back to wholeness.

Drunk at a friend of a friend's party a few weekends after I returned from deployment, I met her. She skittered around, between people's feet. Her ears were so long that she stepped on them as she walked, and it pulled the skin of her face back making her eyes pop out of her head, giving her a perpetual look of surprise.

While people partied in the garage, I sat on the edge of the driveway for two hours, stroking her soft fur and letting her rest in my lap. My pain and anxiety disappeared, and for the first time in over a year, I was filled up with something good. Normally, I was apathetic about dogs, but one look at her squished, bug-eyed little face—flanked by two massively floppy ears—and it was over.

Monday, my friend came into my office, and I gushed about that dog at that party. He told me that her owners were moving to Hawaii and couldn't bring her because of the state's quarantine laws. They were looking for people to take her. Was I interested? I said, "Yes without hesitation. Uncharacteristically, I didn't analyze the situation, weigh the pros or cons and calculate the cost of ownership. All I knew was that I would do whatever it took to have that creature in my life.

Tuesday, I spoke to her owners.

Wednesday, I bought a cage, dog food and a leash.

Thursday, I drove back from Seattle with the dog in my passenger seat.

I named her Maggie after Maggie Gyllenhaal who played a sassy, free spirited woman in the movie Mona Lisa Smile which took place at my alma mater, Wellesley College. Over time, she acquired nicknames: Mag Pie, Maggie Mae, Munchkin.

Getting a dog was the first true grown-up decision I had made, and I wanted her name to mirror the freedom I felt. Every prior decision was bounced up against someone else: my parents, friends, boyfriends. I always told myself that I was simply doing my due diligence, but in reality, I wasn't soliciting opinions, I was begging for permission. I didn't have enough confidence in myself to make choices on my own.

With Maggie, I didn't consult anybody. I followed what my intuition told me and, coming off of a deployment in which I second-guessed all of my decisions, I found enormous freedom and confidence with Maggie by my side.

Her tail was supposed to be long and floppy, but her previous owners had cropped it, so it stuck straight out from her butt like a hot dog. When she got excited, it would wiggle back and forth, too short to properly wag, but long enough that you knew when she was jazzed. She had been the runt of her litter, so scrawny that she used to squeeze through the railings of my patio and escape out into my apartment complex. What she lacked in size, she made up in spirit, excitedly carrying around items double her body weight like a furry, wide-eyed ant.

Maggie coming into my life was an act of grace and mercy, one that I neither earned nor deserved, but that transformed me spectacularly. For a long time, it was the only good decision I made after that deployment. I didn't know how to deal with a boyfriend who had slept with two of my friends while I was away, or the injured body I had brought back from war. So, I drank. I drank every time I hung out with my new boyfriend. The day after my birthday, I woke up with two black Xs on my hands. I was kicked out of the local bar. But, that same week, I woke up the morning after drinking three bottles of wine and ran a 12:30 two-miler on my physical fitness test and was the fastest woman in my battalion of 800 soldiers. I reasoned that if I could still perform at that level, things couldn't be that bad.

When I came home after all night at the bar and saw Maggie's empty food bowl and pee on the kitchen floor, I felt more shame than any binge or blackout could induce. She jumped up and down, her hot dog tail wagging back and forth, completely unconcerned with anything other than the excitement of seeing me. That duality—being loved when I felt completely unlovable—released something in me. I had no qualms about destroying myself, but I refused to bring an innocent down with me.

Maggie was obsessed with me, and when I realized that nothing I could do would change her love, I gladly reciprocated, bringing her everywhere. I stopped drinking and instead of spending my nights at bars, took her on walks around the neighborhood. When I sat crying on the sidewalk outside my apartment, she nudged her way into my lap and licked my tears. I responded to her devotion with devotion of my own by staying three hours extra at work because she fell asleep in my lap and I couldn't stand to disturb her.

I returned her adoration with adoration of my own. One weekend I spent doing a photoshoot with her at a local river. I dressed her up in ridiculous costumes, ranging from a shark to Princess Leia. Our relationship was ridiculous, but it healed me.

Then I had to travel. I left Maggie with some friends, and she couldn't handle the separation. They said that she would constantly shake, anxiously peeing in the house. She had never had a problem before. She missed me terribly. Then one day, she just dropped dead. She was only four years old.

When my friends told me, grief ripped a hole through me, but soon the pain was replaced with overwhelming appreciation. All I could feel was an all consuming gratitude that I could experience a love so deep that it hurt this much. In the days and months after her death, I never mourned her, but always celebrated her, my little Maggie Mae.

COURTNEY WILSON IS A FORMER ARMY ENGINEER CAPTAIN, AND BRONZE STAR RECIPIENT.

JONATHAN K. LOMAX

MORE THAN A SACRIFICE

Stunted in the arches of the VA
I'm watching giants shuffle steps
like newborn babies
Blinded with ravaged eyes
yet hearing the muffled growls
of lions confined to cages

Thunderous sounds of war cries
reduced to mumbles and murmurs
of haunted daydreams
Untreated pain peels the face off
of weaknesses to hear their screams
Brave men convicted of cowardly acts
and sentenced to a thousand deaths it seems

Quartered men
sent to the guillotine
to face fire squads of shadows of their former selves
It’s really not suicide
if that someone kills you from within

This foe or friend
looks just like me

Congested with the concoction
of strange and stranger fruit
Glazed and dazed and confused
from what should protect me
and what will aim at me
to just shoot

Claims that the blood of my people
washed out their foul footstep’s pollution
That even now there is still no refuge
but a hidden genocidal death as a solution

We have fought off the terror of flight
and the gloom of the grave
But the flag does not pertain to me
in this land of the free and home of the brave

Discarded government property
that have passed their useful time
given pence for our sacrifice
and castrated in our prime
As you decimate glorious warriors
sent to desolate lands of thieves
We are ousted as your pockets swell
in your rapacious plan of greed

We hopelessly cling to an assassin’s guild
losing value in a peasant’s wage
grasping for ways to heal soul
Unbeknownst chattels traded
for wealth in blood
noted on the devil’s page

JONATHAN LOMAX RETIRED FROM THE U. S. MARINE CORPS AFTER 21 YEARS OF HONORABLE SERVICE.

Erin Leach-Ogden

Because Of

Today my ears listened
to no less than five languages,
all human.

Today my eyes recorded
images of a thousand colors and styles,
all human.

Today my voice spoke
greetings of kindness to other passing faces, and smiles returned to me,

so human.

Because of today,
I am that much more human and none-the-less
me.

ERIN LEACH-OGDEN SERVED IN THE U.S. ARMY AS A UH-60L BLACK HAWK PILOT, 82ND AIRBORNE.

FANNY GARCIA

VIEWS OF THE VETERAN ART SUMMIT

These photos were taken at the National Veterans Art Museum (NVAM) Veteran Art Summit, held in Chicago May 3 - 5, 2019. As part of the inaugural NVAM Triennial, the Art Summit brought some 50 veteran artists from around the country together to share art, ideas, participate in hands-on workshops, and celebrate the growing community.

Open/Closed at The National Veterans Art Museum
On the first night of the Veteran Art Summit, the National Veterans Art Museum hosted an opening reception for *Open/Closed*, curated by Amber Hoy. The gallery presented the work of several veteran artists. Displays included sculptures, paintings, objects, photographs, and writings. People took turns looking through a View-Master, which included photographs of a mysterious window, taken by the author.

Open/Closed at The National Veterans Art Museum

Circle Up

On Sunday morning, the last day of the Summit, Carlos Sirah led the final workshop and a “story circle” closing discussion. Summit participants gathered in a circle and passed the mic, each taking a turn briefly sharing their experiences from the Summit.

The Bald Eagle's Toupee at DePaul Art Museum

For the final event, art summit participants traveled to the DePaul Art Museum, just north of downtown Chicago, to meet political cartoonist and muralist Eric J. Garcia for an artist talk on his interdisciplinary practice and his installation, *The Bald Eagle's Toupee.*

The high and narrow walls on the second floor of Depaul Museum feature Garcia's red, white, and blue mural, which depicts iconic American imagery. A bald eagle, Uncle Sam, and other satirical political images sparked discussion of social injustices. The audience then followed Garcia into a second room where they were presented with a large nest—his *War Nest*—made from wooden rifles.

Fanny Garcia works from dreams, memories, and military experiences to explore perplexity and lingering emotions.

Toni Topps

How to Connect with the New Toni

I am sorry to interrupt your regular schedule
but this is a Public Service Announcement:

Veterans coming home to a home that doesn't exist
filled with guilt of past lives they left behind
enemy lines, running in line and following
orders from the true enemy's demented mind
scared men and women shaking on the inside
Welcome home to
no home and
no food
no jobs
no training
All I can say is please, and thank you
Feel like my life is dangling in the wind
The veteran can't win!
No retirement
Sorry we aren't hiring!
Standing in line looking for rations
Behind counters with signs stating
"Veterans Benefits"
Where do I sign?
Initial here, here and here.
Sorry you don't meet the income guidelines!
So, who's really benefiting?
Welcome home.
So don't mind me if I sit too long by myself with a dazed look over my face
I'm trying to retrace the exact moment when things went wrong
When my pledge of allegiance meant nothing to those who sit comfortably
Don't mind me as I sit in a corner alone.
I am just trying to calm down voices
of brethren I left whose spilled blood
seems unappreciated by those whose bellies are filled at night
while I contemplate the next supper line, I should stand in or
the next free winter coat drive for me and mine
Or maybe why the Department of Human Services
doesn't consider me human enough, so cutting
what little resources they serve up shouldn't be
a reason I have horrible thoughts and act up!
Don't mind me blank face sitting alone in a corner.
If you only knew I'm fighting a war that's so deep
in cognitive responses that make it hard to respond
to the questions like, "Miss, are you ok?
Did you eat or bath today?
. . . talk or form any new friendships?
How was your weekend by the way?"

Hell no, I can’t remember eating
or bathing. Shit. Sleep evades me
and new friends, nah the old ones can’t stand me,
family makes plans without me. Don’t you think
I have enough rejection riding me!
So I’m at war just trying to find the old me,
and how to connect with the new Toni.
You said she would come back,
take 2 of these and 1 of that, but I suffer
from insomnia and the side effects
of those pills are insomnia and suicidal thoughts.
So is it my fault or yours for prescribing a double dose
of being locked in my head and can’t remember times laying in a bed!
See silence isn’t quiet. She is always listening,
thoughts always bickering,
writing to fight used to be my ticket out of here,
but now life’s turned upside down and I can’t tell if I left or returned.
So don’t mind me!

Back to your regularly scheduled program.

TONI TOPPS IS A FINANCIAL COACH, WRITER, MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER, AND U.S. AIR FORCE VETERAN.

Brian Earley

I Wish I Were a Homeless Vet

Living in a shelter
without much
shame

Lights on and morning
sounds of old men coughing
or seemingly none

The overflow
of toilets, scented
with crack-smoke

Their youth once
overwhelming, now
nearly gone, clinging

Inebriates left in bed
leaving it on the floor
as he overflows still

I wonder what happened
in between, lazy days
and hard shot-filled eyes

Scent of diabetics mixed
with butts and booze and the gnaw
of a toothless mouth

But I know already
to articulate why descents
occur instead of rise

Continued habits led
despising air-filled
smoke deep breathing

And where they go from here
not hard to see, we seem not
hating ourselves

Self-destruction ease terms
Shortened exhaled, then
the why of the despair

With protests
and kicks into
the great deep clean

How easy is this life?
Not that way, instead
ascension

Why is it this way?
it is tough to say, but
loving a wrong way

Who taught these fellows
the art of living, worshipping
everything except love

But you know where
to start between pleasure
appointed pain

It was not a goddess
of virtue, maybe
from below?

There is another way
to let you all know
but be now

Someone is getting
us to kills us without
much effort for them

Rather, fight to get that tune, that harmonic
a way way up and then even more
life's trick plays out, up glory's ladder

Reaching up to Eternity
pulling down the Grace
leaving fake news whilst

That is so easily given from One
above, who does not race, but loves
us all the more, us being in this place.

BRIAN EARLEY SERVED IN THE NAVY RESERVE AND THEN IN THE ARMY, SERVING DURING PEACETIME AS A CHAPLIN AND CIVIL AFFAIRS OFFICER FOR 23 YEARS.

One-Wheeled Skateboard

How about a one-wheeled
skateboard with headlights.
How about a one-legged
derelict with head lice.

A motorized wheelbarrow
delivers bowling balls
or boxes of smiles or pies.

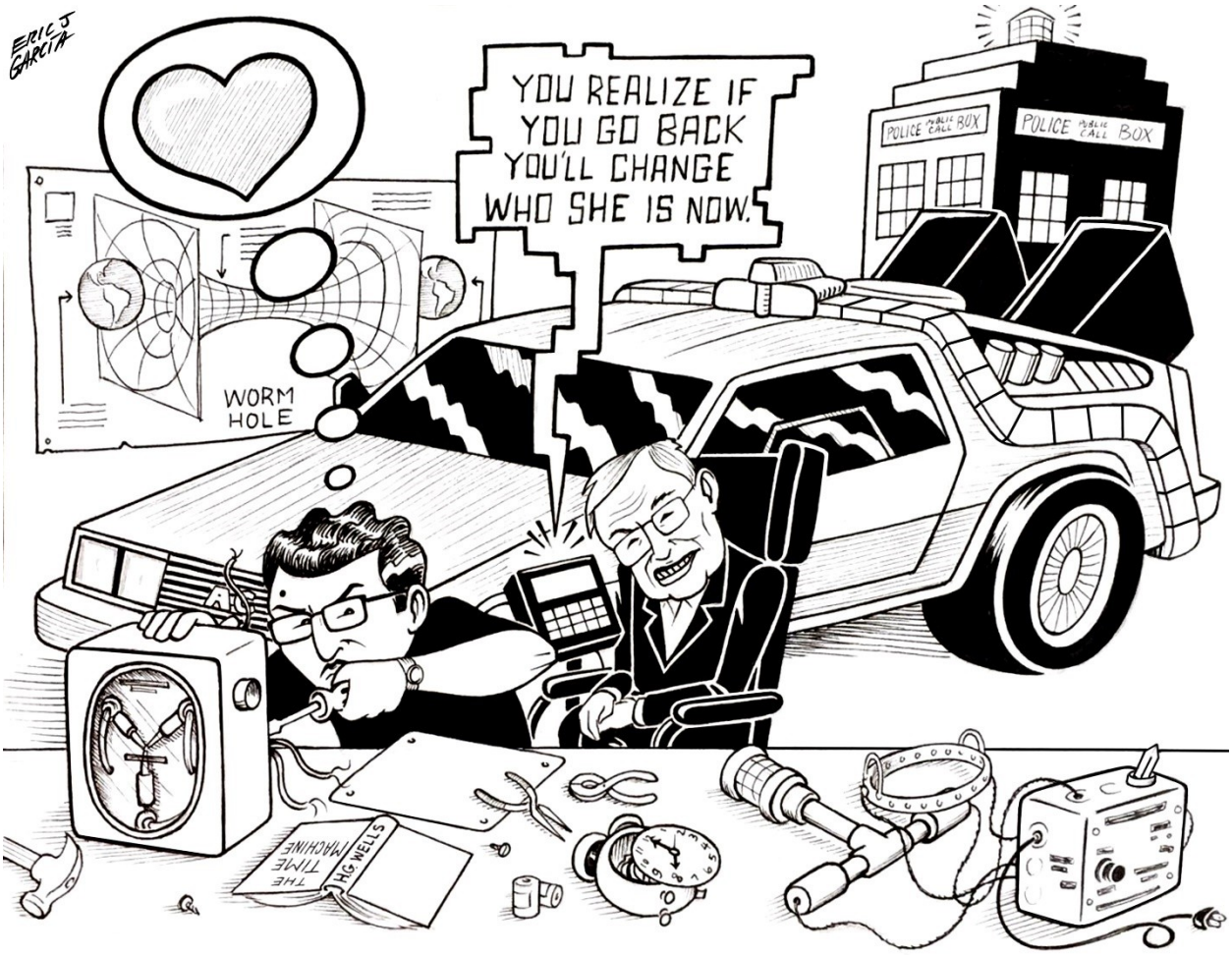
I'm losing light, frightened
by how much more is revealed
by the dark. What matter
if I cannot read my writing.

Four short pages in about
an hour. I could write a book
in two weeks, easy. But then
I might feel obliged to read
it. What value is there in that?
(It has been fun, though.)
Time to go home and eat popcorn.

Alan Asselin joined the Air Force in 1971 and protested against the war in Vietnam.

Eric J. Garcia

Time and Love


ERIC J GARCIA
YOU REALIZE IF YOU GO BACK YOU'LL CHANGE WHO SHE IS NOW.
WORM HOLE
POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX
POLICE PUBLIC CALL BOX
THE TIME MACHINE
H.G. WELLS

Eric J. Garcia uses history to create political art that confronts our understanding of the present.

Tim Corrigan

Please Forgive Us

for Martin Richard

Please forgive us. We are nothing but
"Naked Apes," weaving tapestries of errors

Only to proudly drape them over our broad shoulders:
The Emperor's New Civilization

We hold Our Mother, the Earth, in bondage to business
And G-d, Our Father, a captive to our man-made religions

Even with our Hubble telescope and our 20/20 vision
We are truly blinded by the ways we've been taught to see the world

When Martin Richard, age eight, wrote: "No more hurting people: Peace"
His was a timeless wisdom from beyond this world

While the minds of grown men have been poisoned
By the endless siren call of our masters:

We must let suffering rain down on "our enemies"
Whenever those in power command it

So I apologize to you on behalf of Our Species:

We do not shower you little ones with blessings
Because we take our own for granted

Tim Corrigan served in the U. S. Navy from 1997-1998. He also helped two young Iraqi refugees injured by war find a home.

The Afterlife on Squaw Peak

No matter the machines
with their silent flywheels
and strange swinging on cables
that helped you get here.
No matter the masts of measurement
and reason which the earnest
have strapped to the summit.
There is still the terrible loneliness
of the next valley over
to convenience you with its quartz
and granite flashing like ice
and its meadow emptied of the human.
Flower blossoms—little trumpets
of delight—shudder at your feet.
The shale you stand on is splattered
with bright lichens. You join them
by laying low out of the wind
to look up the flower's name—
scarlet penstemon--and you have
that small, but significant human
pleasure of finally knowing.
This high, you have trouble breathing,
and feeling sleepy, you find
a place without thorns. Your eyelids
tighten, and the wind carries voices
that seem shaken, as if assembled
at your sickbed.
When you wake,
you note how little seems changed.
You perhaps wonder where you came from
and why. You want to take off
your cloths and mark where you have
lain. Now the wind sounds out clearly
and says this is the mountain
of forgiveness, and that the work
will be to traverse the empty spaces
with meaning. If those you love
glimpse you, it will be in the form
of a red tail fox crossing at dusk
into the wood stand, and because they
have loved you, they will watch
as long as you let them. They will not
harm you, so swears the wind,
not this close to heaven.

Reproduced with permission from Fred Marchant. "Tipping Point." Copyright 1993. Winner of the 1993 Word Works Washington Prize.

FRED MARCHANT WROTE FIVE BOOKS OF POETRY INCLUDING "SAID NOT SAID" AND HE DIRECTS THE SUFFOLK POETRY CENTER.

Did I ever love you? Did I ever need you? Did I ever fight you? Did I ever want to? Did I ever leave you? Was I ever able? Are we still leaning across the old table? Did I ever love you? Was it ever settled? Was it ever over? Is it still raining? Back in the flower tree-blossom ever who soul forever trees
PINO